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The Message of Religion to the Men of Our Day

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Rev. C. R. Brown

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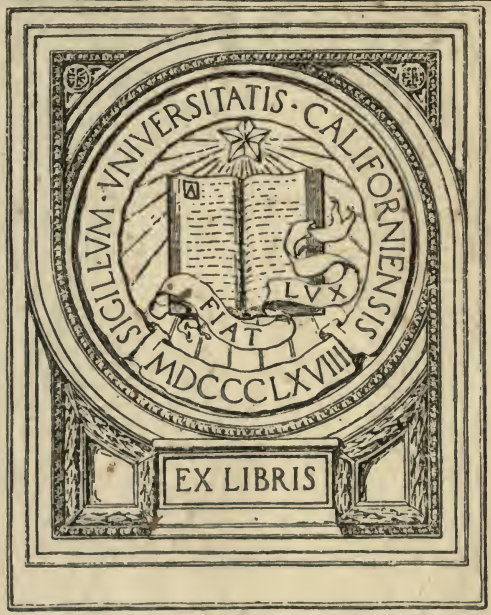

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The Message of Religion to the Men of Our Day

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BY

REV. CHAS. R. BROWN

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*THE MESSAGE OF RELIGION TO THE MEN OF OUR DAY

"After the death of Moses, the Lord spake unto Joshua."—Josh. 1; 1.

THERE is a world of meaning wrapped up in those ten short words. You may say that the real history of the Hebrew race began with its deliverance from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. There are interesting stories stretching further back but they are stories of individuals rather than of a race. The Hebrew nation had its birthday on that memorable night when the Lord in his mercy "passed over" them, and when they in turn "passed over" the Red Sea. Their feast of the Passover down to the present hour is a celebration of those incidents that lay at the foundation of their political and religious development. And the leading figure in that whole period of their history was this same Moses.

He had the qualities that belong to effective leadership. He stirred a race of helpless

*This sermon was first preached in the First Congregational Church, Oakland. It was afterward given in this modified form at Berkeley as the Baccalaureate Sermon before the Graduating Class of 1902 in the University of California; and also at the Anniversary of the Christian Associations during Commencement Week at Stanford University.

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slaves until they were ready to act. He confronted and successfully resisted their oppressors. He led the fugitives across the sea into the wilderness. He conducted them in all their wanderings, finding manna by the way and water in the rocks. He climbed the death-fence at the foot of Sinai and from the top of the Mount gained a vision of God, as it were face to face. He brought down out of that experience the laws that were to lie at the foundation of Hebrew growth and usefulness. He led the people on to the river Jordan and showed them the land of promise just within their reach. And then just there he died.

It seemed a loss irreparable. We wonder how his place could be filled and how the work could go on without him. But the author of the text treats the event calmly,—"after the death of Moses, the Lord spake unto Joshua."

The workers change—they come and go in shifts—the work goes on. Moses, and then after he is gone, Joshua; David the king and then Isaiah the prophet; John the beloved disciple of the inner life and Paul the sturdy apostle of missionary activity; Luther and then Calvin; Jonathan Edwards and then Henry Ward Beecher—so they come and so they go. Each man the servant of an eternal purpose; each man doing his stint and then

sinking back into the rest that remains for the people of God. And into every place left vacant, a new man called !

But it is not only another man but a different type of man who is called into the field. The text brings out a bold contrast. Moses was a man of peace, the meekest of men. We never find him with a sword in his hand. He was busy with the laws, the ceremonies, the institutions that were to educate an illiterate race in rightousness and holiness. He was a man of spiritual vision. He saw the presence of God in a burning bush and put the shoes off his feet for the place was holy ground. He saw the presence of God in a thunder storm at the top of Sinai, and came out of the experience with his face shining from the glory he had seen. He saw the finger of God in the writing of those moral laws that belong to any nation's wellbeing. Along these lines of effort Moses found the presence of God and became the useful servant of His will.

But after this work was under way, after the death of Moses, the Lord spoke unto Joshua. Work of another sort was now to be undertaken. Jericho had to be captured. A licentious and idolatrous people was to be subdued. A footing for the Israelites was to be gained in the land given to their fathers. The conquered territory was to be divided up and assigned to the twelve tribes. Ability of

another kind was in demand; soldierly courage and administrative force were called for. So when Joshua had his vision of the Divine Presence it came in these terms. He was standing outside the walls of Jericho when "behold there stood over against him a man with a drawn sword in his hand." Upon inquiry this mysterious figure proclaimed himself "The Captain of the Host of the Lord." And this place where Joshua stood face to face with the military necessities of the situation and face to face with the offer of divine aid in meeting those necessities, was to him holy ground and he too put the shoes off his feet. It was another vision of the same God in terms that belonged to a different form of service.

So it is always—after the death of Moses the Lord speaks unto Joshua. The text gives us a picture of the constant changes that have been taking place and are taking place now in that work which the Lord of all the values there are, steadily carries forward. Many a Moses and many a method has done its appointed task and passed away; then the Lord has called a different type of man and another sort of method into the field. These changes bring not dismay but inspiration to the children of the kingdom. They indicate that we are the children of the living God. And so in view of the changes

that are taking place in the aspects of religious work, I want to ask what are some of the characteristic features of the message religion has for the men of our day.

I. There has come a new insistence upon intellectual accuracy and intellectual modesty.

It is part of the scientific habit of mind which does not lump things but weighs, measures, analyzes them. While in religion we are confessedly dealing with subjects too vast for complete comprehension or final statement, there is an insistence that as far as we go there be accuracy. In the use of scripture the day has gone when men try to settle the question of probation after death by such texts as that from Ecclesiastes,—"where the tree falleth there it shall lie." The statement about the tree is entirely true but it has no more bearing on the question of probation after death than that other equally true statement that two times two are four. Important New Testament doctrines are not now being artificially bolstered up by the unscholarly and unfair use of Old Testament texts pulled out of their connection and bent out of their true shape. No biblical scholar could hold up his head and look the world in the face if he tried now to make those warm and rosy love passages in the Song of Solomon represent in some allegorical fashion the love of Christ for his church. That whole method of compelling

scripture to mean anything and everything which might make for our side is being abandoned as inaccurate and intellectually dishonest. All straining and twisting of texts is an abomination to the Lord! "Interpret the Bible like any other book," was Jowett's dictum. It shocked the men of that day but it is now a commonplace of biblical scholarship. The sole question is, What do these statements mean, coming as they do from a certain man, out of a certain environment, addressed to a certain set of needs. There is a thoroughgoing insistence upon intellectual accuracy. And nothing less than that could be pleasing to Him who said, "I am the truth. And ye shall know the truth. And the truth shall make you free."

And a new intellectual modesty has also come in. Men are not now making loud affirmations as to what took place "in the Council Chamber of the Trinity" when Father and Son made certain agreements touching the effects of the sacrificial death of Christ. The teachers of religion are not now mapping out the future world with detailed statements as to its heaven and hell, nor giving expert estimates as to the probable population of each when the rolls are all made up. One great Protestant Church many years ago made bold to say that God by his eternal decrees had determined beforehand those who

should be saved and those who should be lost and that nothing men could do would in any wise change the result of those decrees. And now the wisest men of that denomination are wishing with all their hearts that there was some way of quietly shelving those statements to which they can no longer heartily subscribe. The over-confident assertions of other days have given place to the more careful and modest affirmations that the voice of religion is now making.

This fact brings a sense of discouragement to some earnest people. They call our time an "infidel and unbelieving time" and speak fondly of "the ages of faith." It does not seem that way to me. Our age is less credulous than some other ages have been. A shout of laughter would go up if some Oakland citizen claimed that his children were sick and his cow was giving bloody milk because a hostile neighbor had "bewitched" them. Yet it is only a little over a hundred years since the last "witch" was put to death by civil process. That day, thank God, has gone but after the death of such credulity, the Lord has spoken to the intellectual mood and habit of our own age. Was there ever a time when so many men were sure of God, sure of a wise, powerful, beneficent Being who is the ground and source of all finite being? There certainly never was a time when so many men

of all races and tongues looked up into the face of Jesus Christ and saw there the face of the Eternal, their Master, Saviour, Lord! There never was a time when so many serious-minded people, discarding perhaps some of the magic which became entangled with the idea of prayer, firmly believed that prayer is to sweeten the world by its fragrance and change the lives of men by its moral force! There was never a time when so many believed that in this body of literature called the Bible there lies embedded a genuine message from God to men not inerrant in all its scientific and historical statements but abundantly able to make us wise unto salvation and to furnish us thoroughly for every good work! There never was a time when so many looked forward with serene trust to a future life, not mapped out but remaining still an "undiscovered country" as it must remain for earthly experience, yet brought upon the map and within the moral confidence by the life and teaching, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ! This insistence upon intellectual accuracy and intellectual modesty may have reduced the number of points on which religious people stand ready to make positive affirmation but it has increased the number who can join in the affirmation and increased the reality and strength of it ten fold.

II. There has been a change of emphasis in the method by which salvation is accomplished.

Salvation means moral recovery from all that hurts and hinders our growth into the likeness and image of the Father. The changed emphasis in this work may be roughly indicated by the use of two words, "crisis" and "process." They are not suggested as mutually exclusive for in all times the elements of each have blended with the other, but they indicate how the point of view has shifted.

The sacramental idea of religion made much of the crisis. The unbaptized soul is unregenerate but the moment the holy water in the hands of an officiating priest falls upon the head of babe or believing adult, he passes from an unsaved to a saved condition. The dogmatic view affirms that the hearty assent to certain theological propositions works the same change in one's standing before God. If the unbelieving soul can be brought even upon his death-bed to murmur an assent to certain vital truths, it may affect his whole future destiny. The emotional type of religion makes much of crisis—until there has come in the the emotional nature of the man an overturning and overwhelming crisis, he is without the benefits of religion. In all these the emphasis has been strongly upon

the crisis in the moral history rather than upon the process.

You may say that all this is otherwise to-day. Baptism is administered as a useful and appropriate sign of a spiritual process, the cleansing of the inner life by the ministry of God's truth and grace. The apprehension and acceptance of certain doctrinal statements is valuable but only as it induces a certain movement of the will and leads to certain habits of action. And emotional experiences depending as they do upon individual temperament, training, the quality and amount of stimulus given in the service that seeks to produce them, find whatever significance they possess only in the moral attitude that results and the new lines of moral effort to which they introduce the soul. In every case the attention is directed to the process rather than to the crisis which may have some small place within it.

In a word religious experience is being phrased to-day not in terms of crisis taken from some special texts of scripture but in the terms of domestic life, a Father bringing up and bringing out his children into conscious, obedient, joyous fellowship with himself. It is being phrased in the terms of education, the Master educating, leading out his disciples or learners, into selfrealization through the selfexpression of worship and service. The

appointments of the church, the spiritual pædogogy of the Sunday School and nine tenths of all the good religious reading proceed upon the principle that salvation is a moral process conducted by the spirit of God in the heart of the man.

This emphasis matches the mood and method of those who engage in scientific or historical or literary study. It helps to organize religion with the other forces that are moulding the life of the world. It need not and must not obscure the fact that salvation involves the conscious, definite surrender of the will to God and the establishment of filial relations with Him in His kingdom. But in placing the emphasis upon process rather than upon crisis it gives sacredness and significance not alone to the sacramental or emotional moments in the man's moral history, but to all that comes within the range of his interest. It makes it possible for a man to feel that whether he eats or drinks, or buys and sells, or teaches and learns, or prays and sings, he may be doing all to the glory of God and giving all these activities a holy place in that process of salvation which is being worked out within him by the resident energy of the Holy Spirit.

III. There has come a change in the form of the motive.

Once the prominent motive was safety, now

it is usefulness. The rescue idea is not being largely worked in religious effort for it has lost its power of appeal. The cry "Repent and believe or you will go to hell," does not find men where they live as it once did. The offer of blessed immortality or any other personal advantage to those who measure up to a certain standard in their righteous attainments, is not the moving offer it has been. The motive that springs from the joy of usefulness is more in harmony with the mood of our day; it has more gunpowder behind it than the motive that springs from the desire for personal security. And it is more in line with the method of Him who said, "He that saveth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life in my service shall save it." The main attraction in the offer of salvation is the guarantee it brings of an enlarged usefulness in building up the kingdom of God on earth.

The gain of this habit is seen on every side. Those ages of faith, as they are fondly called —what were they doing with their mighty confidence? They put forth huge creeds, which stand to this hour for the dismay and embarrassment of more critical minds, but the hard fact stands that the faith that wrote the confessions was not busy on foreign mission fields, leading the ignorant into the light, or teaching them to treat disease on a basis of medical science rather than of

magic or bringing misguided souls into a knowledge of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The world had to wait for our restless questioning nineteenth century to furnish the missionary impulse that has planted the banner of the Cross from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same. The faith that wrote the huge confessions was not busy building hospitals for the poor, establishing homes for the aged and orphaned, planting day nurseries and social settlements where they would work recovery, laying the foundations that are enabling the strong to intelligently and effectively bear the burdens of the weak. In those ages, men, women and children were dying like rats in the uncared for portions of the cities out of which came the great plagues. To-day the money and the time, the thought and the love of Christendom is hastening into the darker places of earth to come no more out until they are all made bright. "By their fruits ye shall know them"—not by the size, thickness and shape of their creedal trunk and limbs but by their fruits—by what they give off and hand over to feed and bless a needy world. The change of motive from personal security to usefulness is like a tree of life planted in the middle of the street, bearing its twelve manner of fruit for every season of the year. Usefulness not safety—there is the ground of appeal! The

man of God can serve his generation wisely, deeply, permanently, as a godless man cannot —therefore Him and Him only shalt thou serve!

You remember Tertullian's picture. He was an orthodox church father and in a glowing sermon he pictured the bliss of the redeemed. In the cool of the evening they walked out along the battlements of the eternal city. They looked over and there were the lost souls enduring the torments of the under world! As the devils prodded the poor unfortunates and the flames leaped about them in angry heat, the redeemed souls realized afresh the joy of their personal security and the awful fate from which they had been saved! And this moved them to burst forth with new songs of praise and thanksgiving to God!

Does that appeal to you? Does it stir one single atom of Christian impulse in any heart here? Judged by the prevailing attitude of our day does it not look altogether in the wrong direction? What would be the first impulse of a company of genuine Christians standing in that situation now? Surely this, "Cannot we do something for the relief and recovery of those poor fellows? If it lies within the power of God or of man, may we not organize a rescue party to go upon that mission—perilous it may be,—well and good

but let us seek to recover those unfortunates from their pain." Nothing less than that would find the conscience or stir the enthusiasm of the honest-hearted men and women of our day. Usefulness is more to them than personal security. In usefulness they find their salvation; in usefulness they are to realize their heaven; and so up out of the riches of usefulness which Christian character makes possible, comes the appeal that enlists the active eager lives under the banner of the Cross!

IV. There is a new sense of breadth in the undertakings of religion.

In other days the aim seems to have been to recover out of a lost world as much as might be. Brands snatched from the burning; rescued souls from the sinking ship; handfuls of meal taken aside to receive the leaven; groups of people gathered out of the world into the church; favored nations made wise and good while the huge pagan populations across the sea lay in darkness and sin—these familiar expressions indicate something as to the reach of the current ambition. But now the undertaking is greater. Men are saying, "We must put out the fire of destructive evil. We must make the ship that holds our human interests seaworthy and learn to sail it on all seas. We must put the leaven not into a few chosen handfuls of meal

but boldly down into the whole mass of industrial, political, educational, social and international relationships, to the end that the entire lump of earthly life may be leavened." The task is not to get a few people out of the world into the church but to get the church with all its aims and ideals, its principles and spirit out into the world, to the end that the world may be changed and saved.

We all feel how inadequate our present Christian forces are for this greater undertaking but thank God for the courageous Joshuas who are attempting to make "the world the subject of redemption." This big, burly, buzzing, blooming confusion called "the world" is the thing that God loved to such a degree that He gave His only begotten Son for its redemption. The field from which the harvests that alone can fill the granary of God are to grow is, as Christ said "the world" with all its tangled and confusing problems. And nothing less than such a breadth of undertaking will command the interest or the consecration of the people of our time. After the death of the men who attempted less the Lord has spoken unto our time that it might attempt more!

We have not gone far. We have made a dent on the side of China which she scarcely feels as she moves upon her stolid way. We

have done more in Japan and still more in India, although there remaineth much land to be possessed. But the Christian leaven is there working, never to be taken out until those kingdoms are kingdoms of Christ. We have gone a very little way in establishing Christian ideals in industry, in politics, in society or in education, but certain brave men have gone into those regions as John the Baptists crying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." They are the forerunners of something greater. In the presence of the ideals they carry, all other ideals look cheap and weak. Those higher ideals will remain until they subdue all things unto themselves. This greater breadth of view, this falling away of the walls between the sacred and the secular, making all interests clean, this effort to sanctify the whole of life by the presence of moral purpose and spiritual passion, is but the response our time is making to the call of Him who said, "Go ye into all the world; wash it, teach it, organize it into a permanent kingdom and habitation of your God."

V. There is abroad among us a more vital conception of the relation of Jesus Christ to humanity.

You will see what I mean if you set side by side two well-known books. The first was published in 1869 just ten years after Darwin's

Origin of Species appeared and before the ideas it announced had become fairly operative. Canon Liddon of the English Church had given at Oxford University a course of lectures upon "The Divinity of our Lord" and under that title they were published. Then thirty years later, Dr. George A. Gordon of the Old South Church, Boston, published the other book called *The Christ of To-day*. The contrast between the two books is suggestive!

The first emphasizes the difference and distance between Christ and humanity. It tells us strongly that between him and us there is a great gulf fixed. And the main contention is, I believe, true. The overwhelming majority of Christian people worship Jesus Christ, yet they would worship no man, not the wisest nor the best. The difference was there and it was well that it be brought out.

But after the death of Liddon the Lord spoke unto Gordon. In his book Christ is set forth as the Complete Man, the Representative Man, the Son of Man and the Head of Humanity. This truth is not unrecognized in the former book but it is made popular and effective in the later one. The leading claim in *The Christ of To-day* is in itself an argument for his divinity because such humanity, made perfectly in the likeness of the Father, being the express image of His Person, is Divine. And the more vital relation in which it helps

to organize Christ with our struggling, suffering, sinning humanity is splendidly helpful.

Jesus Christ the Head of Humanity, his relation to all men that of the vine to the branch —how full of moral stimulus and inspiration it becomes! The thoughts that I think in my head, the desires I cherish there, the determinations I there form, how they flow out and down affecting powerfully the health, the movements, the efficiency of my whole body! So Christ the head of humanity through the thoughts He thinks, through what He feels and wills, becomes increasingly a determining force in the life of the race to which He stands organically related.

And Christ the Vine, men the branches! Out of that Vine flows perpetually into every branch which does not put up the barrier of a sinful will, the stream of spiritual vitality making the branches alive with the Vine's own life, making them fruitful with the Vine's own fruit! Oh that men would open their hearts to that conception of Christ, not standing apart from us in dogmatic isolation but organized with us! How it would fill every soul with a new moral energy, with a fresh hope for the race, with a magnificent confidence that the kingdom of God can be established on the earth because Jesus Christ is the head of humanity!

It is the concrete and personal always that

makes the potent appeal to the many. The writers of fiction are furnishing three fourths of the world's literary provender at this time we are told, because they attempt to give us pictures of life rather than abstract discussion of its values. And students the world over are not going off alone Faust-like to study in dusty libraries; they are hurrying to the Universities where are the living teachers. And thus the mightiest religious appeal comes from that concrete and personal revelation of the divine in Jesus of Nazareth. This widespread interest in and new feeling for Christ is therefore built upon a sure foundation. It fills every thoughtful man with hope for the future. Grant that the presentation of Christ in much of the popular literature, in the lighter studies of many schools, in the sermons from many a pulpit, are inadequate—alas, whose presentation of Him, the length and breadth, the height and depth of whose love passeth knowledge, is adequate! And grant that much of this interest is superficial. Nevertheless at least the hem of His seamless robe is there and needy souls are blindly but expectantly putting forth that touch of faith which is for their recovery. It is true that on every side the presence of the spirit and power of Christ in our modern life to a degree unknown before in the history of the world, is

bringing good tidings to the poor, binding up the broken-hearted, preaching deliverance to the moral captives and setting at liberty them that are bruised! This day, oh men of California, that scripture is being fulfilled in your ears!

I believe then that religion was never in a position to say so much or to say it so effectively as right now in the message it has for the generation to which you as young men and young women belong. It is for you with open mind and honest heart to receive its message and help phrase it according to the habits of intellectual accuracy that belong to your University training. It is for you with your acquaintance with the cosmic processes that have made the world as we find it, to lend your strength to those processes of moral recovery which are to be the salvation of mankind. It is for you, taught at the expense of the State for the welfare of the State, to find not in personal security nor selfish advantage but in usefulness the motives that will bind you to the highest forms of effort. It is for you to live with your windows open on all sides and in that breadth of view to see to it that all the human interests are coming into the kingdom of God to sit down in sacred fellowship with all the forces that fire the hearts of men with moral energy and spiritual aspiration. It is for you to find

in Jesus Christ the One who somehow is taking the moral government of the world upon his shoulder and who is making all things new because He is the Head of Humanity.

Thank God for all that He said to Moses! Thank Him again that after the death of Moses He spoke unto Joshua! And thank Him yet again, that after all he has said to the generations that are gone, He still has a message for the men of the hour bidding them enter in and possess a land which the fathers saw afar off. "As I was with Moses so I will be with thee. Be strong and of a good courage, then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, then thou shalt have good success. Be strong and of a good courage, for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."

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